

Thaddeus Kosciuszko

National Historic Site
Philadelphia

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

The General returns to the United States...

Cheering crowds and booming cannon salutes greeted General Thaddeus Kosciuszko on his arrival to Philadelphia in August, 1797. Exiled from his beloved Poland, his only wish was to return to his “second country.” Though his many American friends urged him to make a new life and home in the United States, Kosciuszko stayed here less than a year. Turbulent events would draw the General back to Europe in May, 1798.

Instructed to find “a dwelling as small, as remote, and as cheap” as possible, Kosciuszko’s secretary, Julian Niemcewicz, chose Mrs. Ann Relf’s boarding house in Society Hill.

Still suffering from battle wounds received during the Polish Insurrection, Kosciuszko rarely left his bedchamber. He amused himself through reading, hobbies, and entertaining visitors.

Persons of all backgrounds were welcomed here by Kosciuszko. For some visitors, exciting discoveries in science, discussions about social reforms, and the fierce American political scene were the topics of the day.

Others stopped by to share a relaxing game of chess or whist. Young ladies enjoyed having their portraits painted by the General.

For five months this room was Kosciuszko’s home. Recreated from an inventory found in Thomas Jefferson’s personal papers, the room reflects Kosciuszko’s political and personal interests, as well as his vagabond lifestyle. The objects in the room are period pieces similar to those owned by Kosciuszko.



Thaddeus Kosciuszko House
Private Collection

Bedchamber Exhibit

1. Medals

Kosciuszko was frequently depicted wearing these two medals. He received the Polish Cross for Military Valor for his bravery and leadership during the 1792 war with Russia. A member of the Society of the Cincinnati, an American Revolutionary officers' fraternal society, Kosciuszko proudly wore the society's medal.

2. Crutch

In the last battle of the Polish Insurrection, the General received severe wounds to his head and hip. Three years later his right leg was still paralyzed. Unable to move "from one place to the other without the support and help of his Crutches and a Servant," he rarely left his bedchamber.

3. Abolition Society Papers

Opposed to slavery of any kind, Kosciuszko directed in his American will that all of his funds would be used for freeing and educating slaves. Kosciuszko later wrote other wills which led to the revocation of his American will.

4. Tomahawk

Chief Little Turtle of the Miami Indian Nation visited the capital city to negotiate with the U.S. government over tribal lands and to end the illegal sale of alcohol to his tribe. He presented Kosciuszko with a ceremonial tomahawk. During his visit, he became fascinated by a pair of Kosciuszko's spectacles. The General gave the spectacles to the Chief, who joyously responded, "You have given me new eyes!"



*Illustrated by
Robert Neumann*

5. Kitchen Utensils

A soldier for most of his life, Kosciuszko considered himself a vagabond. In keeping with the military adage that an army marches on its stomach, the General was well prepared to eat!

6. Paintbox

Educated in military engineering, Kosciuszko also took lessons in drafting and painting. The invalid General entertained himself by sketching portraits of his visitors. Well known for his generous nature, he presented these drawings as gifts to his friends.

7. Porcupine Gazette

Unwittingly, Kosciuszko found himself drawn into the rancorous American political scene. Sympathetic to Thomas Jefferson's political views, he attracted the vitriolic attention of the Porcupine's editor, William Cobbett. The Federalist supporter used his newspaper to publicly attack the General's integrity and his motives for his secret return to France in 1798.

8. Sable

Russia's Tsar Paul I released Kosciuszko from prison. The admiring Tsar gave the General money and gifts to start his new life in exile. Never comfortable with accepting these gifts, Kosciuszko gave one of these gifts, a sable fur, to his close friend Thomas Jefferson. The Vice-President later posed for a portrait wearing a coat trimmed with the sable. One version of the portrait is located at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The General departs for France...

At 4:00 a.m., on May 5, 1798, Thaddeus Kosciuszko secretly left Philadelphia for France. His hasty departure sparked much speculation. Was Kosciuszko on a secret unofficial diplomatic mission for his good friend Vice-President Thomas Jefferson? Did Kosciuszko intend to lead another insurrection in his homeland?

France and the United States were at undeclared war. At the root of the conflict was the re-establishment of commercial ties between Great Britain and its former colony, the brutal turn of the French Revolution, and the XYZ Affair scandal. Several years later, Kosciuszko publicly admitted to playing a role in encouraging the French government to mend its diplomatic ties with the United States.

Upon his arrival in France, Kosciuszko addressed officers of the Polish Legions employed by the French. "I want to be ever and inseparably with you, I want to join you to serve our common country...Like you I have fought for the country, like you I have suffered, like you I expect to regain it. This hope is the only solace of my life."

Led on by false promises made by the French government, Kosciuszko believed Poland had finally found an ally. Napoleon's rise to power dashed his hopes of a unified and free Poland. Kosciuszko never saw his homeland again. He moved to Soleure, Switzerland in 1815 and died there in 1817.



Thaddeus Kosciuszko
by Julian Rys